

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HC 86

Tuesday 18 October 2022

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley; Bob Stewart.

Questions 326 - 418

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Chris Heaton-Harris MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Madeleine Alessandri CMG, Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Office; Chris Flatt, Director, Strategy, Northern Ireland Office.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Chris Heaton-Harris, Madeleine Alessandri and Chris Flatt.

Q326 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues. Welcome to this one-off show—this spectacular—with our new Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris. Chris, you are very welcome, and your team as well. Could I ask you to introduce your team for the record?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have Madeleine Alessandri, the Permanent Secretary, whom I believe you all know, and Chris Flatt, who is a strategy director in the Department.

Q327 **Chair:** You are all very welcome. Secretary of State, you have recently started in what many would argue is often the most challenging, certainly the most fascinating and one of probably the best jobs in Government. By way of opener, could you flesh out for the Committee, say over a year timeframe, what a successful Heaton-Harris Secretary of Stateship looks like? What does an unsuccessful Heaton-Harris Secretary of Stateship look like?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am sure the Committee will tell me what an unsuccessful one will look like. As for a successful one, in my ideal world, in my dream of dreams—and thank you very much indeed for the welcome and the invitation to the Committee—it would be very quickly to have a re-formed Executive, so decisions for the people of Northern Ireland are taken by the people elected in Northern Ireland. That would be obviously a signal that things are moving on a subject I am sure we might just touch on briefly: the Northern Ireland protocol and our relationship with the European Union.

Q328 **Chair:** The odds on that happening were not particularly good, were they?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have some form in these areas and I am a glass-half-full man, as you know. Let us see how that works through the system and maybe we will talk about it a bit later.

You have got to have an Executive coming back, so that decisions are taken. Then there is a build-up to the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which a whole host of people in Northern Ireland, the south, Great Britain and America will be wanting to celebrate in a big way. I hope it will demonstrate lots of chances of prosperity, with huge amounts of inward investment flowing into Northern Ireland, a celebration of peace and prosperity for 25 years, and a look forward from there. Then, hopefully, the role of the Secretary of State will not diminish, because it is fairly well determined, but will go back to what would be a relatively old-fashioned version of what a Secretary of State does, where most things would be conducted by the Executive.

Q329 **Chair:** You have answered the question of what an unsuccessful Secretary of State should be: none of those things occurring. On your



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point about the Good Friday agreement and its 25th anniversary, do you see that as a moment for marking and celebration, or do you see it as an opportunity for both assessment and potential collaborative review?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I see it as a bit more than that even. There are three members of your Committee who are members of my political party, and I used the slot at my party's conference just recently to talk about the Belfast/Good Friday agreement with my other two Ministers. The reason I did that is that I have become very aware, in the short time I have held this role, that there is actually a bit of education to be done in England, Scotland and Wales as to why the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is so important and what it has done.

It is not just the things that you talked about—a general build-up. I also want to do a bit of a reminder to people. At the weekend I was looking at the build-up to that agreement and all the political capital that was staked by so many people at that period of time. I remind people all the time that, in my lifetime—in my political lifetime, in 1997, in the general election—motorways were closed because of bomb threats across the country.

There have been plenty of unbelievable tragedies, which I do not particularly want to linger on here, that have really hit the people of the four nations massively hard, and yet somehow, because of maybe 25 years of growing peace and prosperity and it being less in the news, there is a lack of understanding in England, Scotland and Wales—maybe more England and Wales. I would not say I worry about it, but I do not think people quite understand the importance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Q330 **Chair:** Do you have a concern that the sort of dividend that flows from it is hard-baked and taken for granted as always being there?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, and the peace that has flowed from it equally so. It has been hard won over a long period of time.

Q331 **Chair:** Maybe enforced viewing of the final episode of "Derry Girls" in every school actually would not be a bad thing. There may have to be a few bleeps.

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is an opportunity, though. I hope that it is going to be a time for reflection on what was good in the past and how it can be built on for the future. We can use the moments that we will have in time, with maybe some big visits, big moments and speeches from fantastic orators, such as you, Chair, so people will be reminded of the importance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and what it has done for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland as we move forward.

Q332 **Chair:** On a general political thing, you are a former Minister in the Brexit Department, a committed Brexiter and a former chair of the ERG. Northern Ireland voted a different way in the referendum. What are you doing, as Secretary of State—I am not talking about a distillation of your



views—to build bridges with the other political parties? There was not an assumption, but always an anxiety, that the Conservative Party is closer to one party than another. What is your strategy for making sure that all the political parties in Northern Ireland have equal access to your phone, your ear, your desk, your time, and so on?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is not a strategy. Claire Hanna asked me a question in my first OPQs about my political views, as it were. It is easy to say anything, so you will have to judge me on what I actually do. I have five or six weeks now of demonstrating that I am happily talking to all sides. I do not necessarily have an open-door policy, but I have pretty much an open-door policy. Too many people have my mobile number, but fortunately not the *Daily Mail* for that leak thing they did. I believe in talking to people.

Q333 **Chair:** In any of those initial conversations, has anything pleasantly surprised or disappointed you? You do not have to attribute the surprise or the disappointment to an individual. You are engaging, but whether people are engaging with you is, I suppose, the question.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think people are genuinely engaging with me. I certainly feel that way and I am sure others will tell me if that is not the case. I really think I am getting the fullness of everybody's views. No one is holding back but, in all my dealings with anybody from Northern Ireland, they are yet to hold back. I like that, because I am a great believer that politics is about doing what you say and saying what you do. I think that I am getting real answers to my real questions, and I am being asked proper questions about what I intend to do and how I intend to conduct myself. I am happy to give fairly short and straightforward answers to that.

Q334 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you to the Secretary of State for joining us. You will know that there was an election in May. Despite the people having spoken, they have not had the opportunities to discharge their mandates. I hope the Secretary of State understands the frustration and cynicism it breeds in Northern Ireland when we have the election part all the time, but much less of the governance, achieving outcomes, and scrutiny parts that are supposed to come in between. It reduces the democratic process to just sending messages and not actually delivering on the promise of the agreement or creating opportunities. I will ask what steps he has taken to ensure that the institutions can be restored, including decoupling the issues of restoration and achieving a protocol deal, because they are different things and on different tracks. What steps has he taken to avoid an election having to be called next week, which would ultimately face the same challenges and the same cast of characters on the other side of it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think I have been fairly straightforward in everything I have said and done in this job that I would like to see the Executive re-form. I understand that there is a reason why it has not and so there has been another twin track to try to make sure that we can



demonstrate that there is going to be some movement on the issues around the protocol that stop people coming into the Executive. That is a job of work in itself.

I do not know how popular this is in my party anymore, but I am still a localist. I still strongly believe in devolution and I think it is the right thing as a practice. I know maybe some of the models around the country might not have worked as everybody would have wanted, but it is an evolution as well. I believe that the best decisions about people's lives are taken by people elected by them and close to them.

I have been fairly straightforward. Every time I have been asked that question, I have been urging everybody to go back into the Executive, because there are some decisions that need to be taken by that Executive, when it comes to—I am sure we will talk about it—the Budget and a whole host of other really important areas where decisions are best taken by MLAs in this particular case.

What have I done? I have met all the party leaders. I have met pretty much every MLA who has asked to meet me. I am happily meeting all the MPs from all political parties. As I say, most people seem to have my mobile number, and they are actually very generous to me and not using it too much, but I am in constant contact. We had the press conference after the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference a couple of weeks ago, which I used to say this again. If we do not get a re-formed Executive by one minute past midnight on 28 October, I will be calling an election. That is what the law requires me to do and that is what I will be doing.

I know that lots of people do not want that to happen, but it is a legislative requirement. In this place, I cannot see the space for any emergency legislation, let alone a general will for it. I discussed it with my Cabinet colleagues this morning. I cannot be clearer: that is what will happen on 28 October.

Q335 Claire Hanna: Colleagues will come on to the Budget and other legislative necessities that would happen in that event. Do you feel that an election campaign and people painting themselves into even tighter corners would be conducive to some of the outcomes that you have discussed, in terms of restoring governance and addressing the issues you have raised?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The best solution would be having an Executive up and running, without a shadow of a doubt. In no uncertain terms, that is the best course of action. Every other course of action is suboptimal. The Executive going ahead, just bumbling along as it is at this point in time, with Ministers appointed but not taking decisions, obviously is not working. Having an election is a legal requirement—fine.

If we come back and people choose not to go into positions, almost immediately the Ministers fall away and it gives me a few tough decisions



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to make, which I would much rather not be taking. I am fully cognisant of the issues that I have been reading about in the newspapers and being told about by real folk I know—in real streets, on real doorsteps, as it were—that they are facing with the health service.

I have a particular issue, which I will doubtless come on to, about how we get the non-domestic fuel subsidy paid for those who use heating oil. Lots of things would be a lot easier if the Executive were running that have real-world outcomes for people in Northern Ireland. My focus is trying to charm, beguile and coax everybody into that place that they come back into the Executive. I would like to think that I will be successful, but, if I am not, I am afraid it is that election.

Q336 Sir Robert Goodwill: Secretary of State, do you think, in terms of the constitutional settlement and the power sharing agreement, that we are maybe going through a bit of a generational change? Most of us could not believe that Ian's dad, Ian Paisley, and Martin McGuinness could even be in the same room, never mind work together. They became known as the Chuckle Brothers. I do not know if you agree, but maybe that long shadow of the troubles is darkening the political situation less so, which may be changing that incentive and the importance of making that work. I do not know.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I just want to make sure I have understood your question correctly. Essentially, the institutions, as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, are fairly straightforward. Are you asking whether I think there should be an evolution of those institutions, based on what is going on?

Chair: I think Sir Robert's question was more whether you think people are taking it for granted and are therefore not as focused on seeing it as one of the main institutions. Is that right? That was my understanding.

Q337 Sir Robert Goodwill: It has often been described to me as like having a system that means that Jeremy Corbyn and Iain Duncan Smith must always work together and form a Government. If we suggest that here, people say, "That will never work." It did work a generation ago, but is that something that is less likely to work now, because the scars of the troubles are maybe slightly more healed as time goes on?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do not for one second think that any singular MLA or any political party does not want to do the best for the people who elect them. I truly believe that, and I have seen individual examples of MLAs from different political parties that demonstrate to me that they are just the same as every Member of Parliament and doing the best for their constituents in every way they can. There is a political problem that we have, which is one between the UK Government and the European Union, so not necessarily one that could have been foreseen in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.



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Do I think the institutions are working? They are not at the moment. You look at strand 1 of the Good Friday agreement and think, "That is not in a good place. The Executive have not been working, on and off, for a decent period of time," but by God is it better than what went before it. I would never be so presumptuous to think that a Secretary of State with an English constituency would have the solutions to these problems. I know that a lot of thought has been going on among the Northern Ireland parties, and within the Northern Ireland parties, about what that might look like. There could well be a time coming when those conversations break out into the public domain and there is a proper debate. If I am Secretary of State at that time, I will fundamentally engage at the appropriate time. The institutions can work and, when they do work, they have tended to work very well.

Q338 Stephen Farry: Welcome to the Secretary of State. As we transition from the election question, would one of the unintended consequences of an election be that the momentum that has now built up between you and the European Union around the protocol negotiations would come to a halt? Previously, whenever we had an Assembly election, the European Union decided that it would be prejudicial for it to be involved in negotiations that may be seen as having an impact on the election. Could that be an unintended consequence?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. I think talks will continue.

Q339 Stephen Farry: Moving on to the budget issue, as you are well aware, Secretary of State, there are a lot of challenges at present in Northern Ireland with how to budget, and Government Departments cannot effectively plan ahead. We are losing the impact of a multiyear Budget. Some Ministers, without a proper framework, are currently overspending. I think it is over £660 million at this stage. Authorisation to Departments at the moment is only about 65% of last year's allocations.

It is probably realistic to think that we are not going to have an Executive in the next few weeks, I am afraid. What are your plans in terms of any intervention from Westminster to set a Budget? What discussions have you had with the Northern Ireland Departments in that regard? I noted that, in one of your previous answers, you said that there are no plans or no space for any emergency Northern Ireland legislation, which would perhaps concern us as it pertains to the Budget issue.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I want to get the Executive running. Let us start with that.

Stephen Farry: I take it as read, absolutely.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Please take it as read, because it is really important that I get that message across. Realistically, it falls to me and the Ministers. We will be bringing forward a Budget Bill, a small technical piece of legislation, which would authorise the Departments to draw down sums out of the Consolidated Fund and to use those resources. It would give the Departments in Northern Ireland the legal power to spend and



allow them to access all the funding available to them, but it would set departmental budget limits, which gives the Departments certainty against which to plan their spending.

This is not my preferred option by a long, long way, but it does not preclude a new Executive springing into life. Should it form within the financial year, it could make its own budgetary decisions again. As I say, as someone who believes in devolution, and the settlement that Northern Ireland has and how it could work, those decisions are much better taken in that format than having a technical piece of legislation basically carve up the money.

Q340 Stephen Farry: I have two follow-ups. First, in the event that a Budget Bill was taken forward through Parliament, what opportunity would there be for potentially this Committee, or indeed other structures, to have some detailed scrutiny of decisions in that respect? That probably leans into the second point. How far can you go, in terms of taking almost strategic decisions around allocations, rather than simply going forward with pre-existing budgets? Can you make differential allocations in line with the emerging pressures in Northern Ireland? I am particularly mindful that there is money sitting at the centre, which is unallocated from Barnett consequentials that have arisen over the past six or seven months, some of which are cost-of-living-related.

Chris Heaton-Harris: On the first point, I would be very keen and do what I can so that this Committee, or indeed others, can scrutinise this technical Bill before and throughout the process. I am quite sure there would be a decent amount of scrutiny of it. I do not know what format that could take, Chair, but I am sure there is some way that it can be done. I am completely up for that, but I do not think it would be that sophisticated, or as sophisticated as you would hope.

Q341 Stephen Farry: What about in terms of those central allocations?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is where I do not think it could be that sophisticated. It would be more as in making sure that the Departments could pay the bills, as it were. It would also be ensuring that they ran within their annual budget.

Q342 Stephen Farry: That runs the risk that moneys in the centre that are unallocated fall and are returned to Treasury at the end of the financial year, which could be a loss to spending power in Northern Ireland. If you do not allocate the money that currently sits in the centre, that £250 million or so, that money could be lost.

Madeleine Alessandri: We will work with Treasury very closely on that. There is a budget exchange mechanism as well.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do not think you have to worry about that particular issue.

Q343 Chair: To be clear, a budget underspend would not automatically be



transferred to HMT; it would be held and rolled over.

Madeleine Alessandri: A technical negotiation would need to go on between the Treasury and our Department to work through that. In the past, at end of financial year, the Executive have made use of a budgetary exchange mechanism. When they have not drawn down money, it has been able to be taken into the following year.

Q344 **Stephen Farry:** I appreciate we are now getting quite late into the financial year. I think the preference would be for that to be spent in year, given the current pressures.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Based on what we know from the Finance Minister, for example, there is quite a big overspend at this point in time. I am not convinced there would be much money in pots that would be underspent at this point.

Q345 **Stephen Farry:** How flexible or kind are you going to be to the Executive, if they are re-formed, around their current overspend? Can you have a word with the Treasury?

Chris Heaton-Harris: You should get a Treasury Minister in here to talk to that. I will always do my bit for Northern Ireland, but we all might be waking up to the fact that finances are a bit tight, in a sense. Everybody will have to cut their cloth accordingly.

Q346 **Claire Hanna:** It is very much, as you said yourself, better than what went before, but I think everybody acknowledges that governance can run a little better in Northern Ireland, even whenever it is up and running. What assessment have you made of the effectiveness of the strand 1 institutions and how they are being operated? In particular, what assessment have you made of the risk of them disincentivising compromise—if the bigger parties get their vote out, they can block the formation of a Government—and the risk of locking in, I suppose, green and orange thinking through designation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: In strand 1, the Executive have not been running while I have been Secretary of State, so it is very difficult to make an assessment from my experience as Secretary of State as to how it is running. Historically, from all the background reading and briefing I have had, while obviously there is always going to be political debate around things, it has worked. Decisions have been made; things have happened; policies have been changed; the powers devolved to the Assembly have been used. I could probably make the odd political point, but that would be political point scoring.

I tend to think that there are a decent range of powers available to the Executive. Based on my briefing, when they have been operated by the Executive they have worked quite well. I am with you that everything can evolve and get better, but I would like to take that first step first and see what the current Executive could do.



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Q347 **Claire Hanna:** I feel your pain. I joined the Assembly in 2015, and the Finance Committee, and I was trying to get my head around the budgetary process. I had to go back to, I think, 2003 before I found a year where the process had run in a normal way, because it is full of interruptions. Is exploring those mechanisms, including those veto mechanisms, something that is on your radar if you end up having to run an election and be presented with the same problems in spring next year?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Currently, no, that is not on my radar.

Q348 **Ian Paisley:** Secretary of State, good to see you. Thank you for your visit to North Antrim earlier in the month, to Wrightbus. I look forward to a visit to another industry later this month as well, here on the Terrace, which affects my constituency quite considerably. It is good to see and I thank you for your engagement. I think you said you are very accessible, and so far that has been the case.

Could I come back on one of the questions Stephen asked? Stephen asked a point about negotiations on the protocol with the EU. You answered about talks. Of course, there is a very important difference, in that there has not actually been a minute of negotiations since the protocol Bill. I want that to be confirmed—that there have been zero negotiations with Europe—because the mandate has not been changed, which means there is no intention, until that mandate is changed, to actually negotiate. That mandate change lies in the hands of Europe, not in the hands of the UK.

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, I know that Mr Paisley became a grandfather for the first time on Saturday, so I congratulate him on that.

The thing that everybody needs to understand is that these are quite complicated on all sides. They are talks at this point in time. There are conversations about what a landing zone could look like for those talks. The Foreign Secretary, who leads from our side, is having regular conversations with Maroš Šefčovič, who is the lead negotiator from the European Union. I think the latest conversation was yesterday.

Everybody is approaching this in a positive and grown-up fashion, but just because the mood music has changed it does not mean that the talks are not quite tough. They are on different areas where there has not been agreement in the past. It is very important that we work on the basis that everybody is in a much better place, but these are talks.

The importance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was recognised by the European Union in its negotiating directives back in May 2017. Basically, nothing in that agreement between the UK and the EU should undermine the objectives and commitments set out in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and all its parts and its related implementing agreements. There is a recognition of the importance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement on both sides. There is a positive atmosphere, but these are talks at the moment to make sure we get to the right place.



Q349 **Ian Paisley:** I wanted clarity and it is important to have that clarity, because in your opening comments to our Chair you have put hand in hand the issue of re-forming the Executive and I think what you called movement on the Northern Ireland protocol. Until there are actually negotiations, there is going to be no change on that second side of the coin.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I understand that. I will very gently push back, because I have had different positions articulated to me as to how far we need to go with the Bill that we are putting through the Houses of Parliament and what a landing zone might look like. I want to emphasise that the talks are taking place in very good faith and good humour, with a positive agenda. The European part in those talks completely recognises how important it is to have an Executive up and running in Northern Ireland as well.

Q350 **Ian Paisley:** I have taken you down that road probably far enough, because I know others will want to ask a question later on. I wanted to come back on this issue about the institutions and the assessment of getting institutions to work. You have used the term "mood music", so having things right and the right atmospherics.

Do you appreciate how difficult it is when, in the last days and hours, we have had a situation where a Sinn Féin councillor, now a former Sinn Féin councillor, Jonathan Dowdall, has been convicted for facilitating murder in a gangland murder? We have numerous examples now of inexplicable chants, with the Republic of Ireland ladies football team chanting pro-IRA slogans, and then other pro-IRA chants going on now in airports in the Republic of Ireland. We also have a political leader in Northern Ireland saying that there has been really no alternative to IRA murder and violence. Are you able to push back on the Irish Government, the Dublin Government, on the Sinn Féin leader and on others to indicate to them just how difficult these actual examples of people's conduct are going to make negotiations to fix the Northern Ireland peace?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank you for raising the point you do in the manner that you did. I have not had the opportunity to raise those personally, but I am the sort of person who absolutely would, and so I would happily. I put it, again, into that historical context. I completely understand how significant and important these things are. Twenty-five years ago, when the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was being formed, there were at least equal, if not much worse, things going on in the background, and yet people still chose to come together for peace and prosperity for Northern Ireland.

I know that it is a big ask, because trust between all sorts of sides has broken down over a period of time. I completely understand the different views within the communities of Northern Ireland and the different views between the communities of Northern Ireland. I am with you.

Q351 **Ian Paisley:** Twenty-five years ago, I was 25 years younger, but I also



had an expectation that my children, and indeed my grandchildren, would grow up in a world where the IRA was ancient history and where comments about supporting violence were in our past, but it is the politics still of today. While at some points it seems we have travelled a long way, in some instances we have travelled in a circle for some parties and we are back there, 180 degrees. I am wondering how you actually break that cycle.

You know yourself, taking it away from Northern Ireland, if there was a pro-Nazi song raised at a football match in Germany, or anywhere in Europe, the authorities would clamp down so hard on that, because of the intolerance towards that intolerance. What could the Secretary of State do to really emphasise that that is intolerable behaviour and is stopping and impeding progress?

Chris Heaton-Harris: You are talking to a football referee, so the football analogy is well made. I really understand the point, and the hurt and the memories that get re-invoked by people who might not even understand the chant or whatever they are saying, what it means and why, in this particular case, a community can be so offended by these things. It is down to the different authorities to sort it out, but it is all about respect, is it not?

To me, this is about trust and respect. That is how the Belfast/Good Friday agreement came about in the first place. I remember it, but I do not remember it as vividly as you do, Mr Paisley, in the slightest. It was, at that time, also a leap of faith. I am someone who always tries to look forward. It is great to look back. I am an amazing Eurosceptic. I can blame all sorts of things on our relationship with the European Union. I can do all that, but you also have to look forward.

The first question the Chair asked me was where I see Northern Ireland in my tenure. I would like to see it as the most prosperous place in the United Kingdom to live and work, where peace is absolutely the norm. There will always be, because of the tragic circumstances of the troubles, people who—we will maybe talk about it—quite legitimately want to have either justice or closure, or both, of things that happened in the past. The prospects for the future, for people's kids and grandkids, could be absolutely amazing if we get this right.

It is a big "if" and I know there are lots of moving parts, including a European piece that the UK Government do not have complete control of. What you have given me examples of are remnants of the past we want to get rid of, because the more people look to the future, the better the outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland will be.

Q352 **Stephen Farry:** I wanted to come back to your answers to Claire Hanna around the issues of institutional reform. Particularly from my party perspective, we find it untenable that there are now 18 MLAs in the assembly who are officially down as "other", but, if and when the Assembly is restored, their vote does not quite count for the same value



as others. Do you agree that that is not something that is sustainable?

The second point is probably even more immediate. Genuinely, if we are facing a situation where there is prolonged deadlock, in terms of the current structures being restored, and, on the other hand, we are seeing a vacuum, with you intervening on a very light-touch basis, basically civil servants keeping the lights on, is the consideration of reform really that unpalatable an option?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is a place for a conversation about this in the future, but I do not think it is for the Secretary of State to engender that debate. It has to come from the people of Northern Ireland who it directly affects.

Q353 **Stephen Farry:** The Government obviously have a role, as a co-guarantor of the agreement.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Absolutely, and when that time comes I will use my convening power, my good auspices and whatever knowledge I might have garnered by that time to help. I am strongly of the belief that any evolution of the institutions has to come from the grassroots.

Q354 **Chair:** On that point, as a point of philosophical principle, if you will, do you see any merit, in terms of trying to guarantee greater stability to the Executive and other political and civic institutions across Northern Ireland, in exploring a moving away from—and I put this in inverted commas—“them, us and other”?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I see your point. Theoretically, I completely understand, yes, but practically—

Q355 **Chair:** I get the practicalities of where it comes from, but, philosophically, do you see some merit?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am a great believer that things can be improved and institutions can evolve, without a shadow of a doubt.

Q356 **Chair:** Can we have a brief word on the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference? The most recent one mentioned ongoing work to enhance relations between the British and Irish Governments. You would have to be pretty tin-eared not to realise that those relationships have been pretty poor and, since you have arrived, they have got a whole lot better. That allows you, Secretary of State, to claim credit for that improvement. You will have a conference, but we need processes, not events. What is the ongoing work?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is quite a lot of ongoing work. I wanted to have a reset of the relationship. I thought it was very important that we did. No one benefits from there not being a really positive relationship between the UK Government and the Irish Government, so I was keen to do that. I happen to know my key interlocutor well from my days in the European Parliament. I trust him and I would like to think that he can trust me. It is Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister. He knows I



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have very strong views on all sorts of things that he has different views on. In fact, we have probably, over a pint or two in the past, discussed these in boring, tedious detail.

Chair: You have history.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, we have a bit of history. There is all sorts of ongoing work. The cross-border issues of security are quite important. The Irish Government also have a view on legacy that is important to recognise. As I have said, I am keen to improve the legacy Bill.

There are the relationships that develop between the NIO and the Irish Government. They are already good and strong, but I want them to function and it needs to be something where the issues that the BIIGC was set up to talk about can be talked about in a full and frank way, where we do not have to agree all the time, but we can have the frank discussions and understand each other's positions. I picked two off the top of my head, but I am sure there are plenty of others we could delve into.

Q357 **Chair:** Your Minister of State gave a rather emotional set of words, but very powerful. Certainly from the feedback I have had, they were viewed by many as being very important. There was that language of building up relations and talking about closest friendship, etc. He was mentioning this at the party conference just this month. There are the formal staging posts of relationship, meetings and so on and so forth. It is your vision—your plan—to have more day-to-day conversations and engagement? You have mentioned things like security, where clearly there is a common interest in that, i.e. to develop as a more organic thing, rather than just compartmentalised.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Q358 **Mr Campbell:** On the issue of the BIIGC and your Minister of State's comments, there did appear to be an improvement, in terms of mood music. As you said, your previous form and involvement may have helped with regard to that. All of that is quite good in terms of helping to go forward for meetings and Committee sessions, etc. In the cold, hard realities of Northern Ireland, where people need to start to see tangible process that they can see, feel and touch, how has the mood music translated into potentially getting that tangible progress, particularly as it affects the protocol that is poisoning the atmosphere at the moment?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Friendships are one thing. Friendships allow us to talk much more in a blunt way without people taking offence. Maybe it is a weakness of mine, but 10 years in the European Parliament means I have a fairly good understanding of the European institutions and how they worked at that point in time, and I have paid fairly close attention to how they have evolved in their time. It is also important to have a knowledge and understanding of the institutions you are dealing with.



As Mr Paisley was talking about, Commissioner Šefčovič's mandate is given to him by the Council and impressed upon him by the Commission President. If you want to expand the mandate, there obviously has to be some leeway given, informally or formally, at those levels. Understanding that is quite important. Friendships go a decent way, but, at the end of the day, we need to have a negotiated settlement. That is the best way forward and everybody is committed to it.

Q359 Mr Campbell: If people back home hear about better mood music, potential movements of some kind and potentially people shifting slightly, they want to know what that means. That all sounds very nice and it shows that people are working better together, but they need to see the evidence of what that is likely to translate into in those cold, hard terms I alluded to at the start of the first question.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Equally, I have been around enough, in both European and British political terms, to know that it is quite foolish to comment on any current state of talks, negotiations or whatever because things move. Things change. I also am not someone who will draw timelines as to when things need to be done by, because you get to that point where everyone is concentrating on the date, rather than the issues.

Q360 Mr Campbell: Are things moving now? You said things changed and things move.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Talks are going on in good faith, with both sides trying to find a solution and negotiating.

Q361 Mr Campbell: That is not the same as saying things are moving.

Chris Heaton-Harris: No, it is not exactly the same as saying things are moving, but I am not going to comment on the talks or the negotiations. It is not my job. I am not in charge of them; I do not run them.

Q362 Mr Campbell: If things were moving, I am sure you would be made aware of that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think I would have a clue.

Q363 Chair: Can we try to establish something? There are a lot of people who go, "Why is the FCDO doing this?" It is effectively a trade matter, so why is it not with the Department for International Trade? It is an issue that affects Northern Ireland. Why is the Secretary of State not doing it? What is the formal reporting mechanism? Is there a Cabinet sub-committee? How does the Foreign Office liaise with DIT and NIO in seeking advice, a steer and up-to-date information?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is a Cabinet sub-committee: the Foreign Policy and Security committee, which the Foreign Secretary reports to, and I sit on when matters pertaining to Northern Ireland are talked about.



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Q364 **Chair:** When was the last time that met?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It was last week. Is that right? I think so.

Madeleine Alessandri: Yes, last week.

Q365 **Chair:** Before the Foreign Secretary or whoever agreed to something, would it be your expectation that the phone would be picked up to you to say, "You are talking to all these people; how do you think it will play"?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Q366 **Chair:** You do not have a right of veto, though.

Chris Heaton-Harris: No, it would be a Government decision. I guess it will be a Cabinet decision.

Q367 **Chair:** This would not be done by Foreign Secretary fiat. It would be a decision of Cabinet.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, and the Prime Minister of course.

Chair: Thank you; that is helpful.

Q368 **Bob Stewart:** We have touched on the protocol quite a lot. I am not sure quite what more you can say. What is the situation on current negotiations? What is your feel for how it is going?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As you know better than anybody—I said this earlier—I am a glass-half-full person, so I think the talks are going as well as you could expect and I am hopeful for the future.

Q369 **Bob Stewart:** You are hopeful. Are you increasingly hopeful?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am always increasingly hopeful. I do not want to comment on the status or any of the usual things.

Bob Stewart: Yes, sure, you cannot. I get that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Knowing how these things have worked in the past, you can get to a really good place and then they can all topple over. There were some fundamental differences between the two sides when we set off, but the talks at least now are really being done in good faith and good humour.

Q370 **Bob Stewart:** I am not sure how far we can push this. Has an implementation meeting taken place since February? Are you able to make a comment on that?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Talks between officials have been ongoing for two or three weeks now.

Q371 **Bob Stewart:** There is no such thing as an implementation meeting.



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Chris Heaton-Harris: No. The European Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič and James Cleverly have regular catch-ups to make sure that things are going in the right direction.

Q372 **Chair:** Are we in the tunnel, Secretary of State? Are we approaching the tunnel?

Chris Heaton-Harris: This is a metaphor I do not quite get.

Chair: Have we bought a ticket to get into the tunnel? Is there a tunnel? Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Ian Paisley: There is more tunnel.

Mr Campbell: Has the driver arrived yet?

Chris Heaton-Harris: In negotiations, I am very aware, especially in business or whatever, the one thing you can always guarantee is that, when there is light at the end of the tunnel, someone will say, "Let us build more tunnel."

Chair: Yes, or "What the hell is driving towards us?"

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes. Let us just say that talks are ongoing.

Ian Paisley: But no negotiations.

Q373 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** There was a meeting yesterday of the UK side of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, which is a new structure between the European Parliament and Westminster. There were concerns raised about some joint working programmes, which were nothing to do with Northern Ireland. They were about the Horizon project, which is on joint participation in research and development—we contribute to that and then bid for some of the projects—Euratom and others. Are you aware that the Commission is deliberately linking the protocol negotiations to these other unconnected issues? Is it doing that to up the ante and to raise pressure, or is it just because within the Commission there is not that ability to work in multiple streams?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The European Commission is a big administration, so I am sure it has the ability to work in a myriad of ways. I have heard the same conversation take place, but I do not know the honest answer.

Q374 **Ian Paisley:** I just want to get something in the diary. Will the election be on 8 December or 15 December? It is either a six-week or seven-week campaign. What are we looking at?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I would like to think it would be a relatively short campaign, but I am wary of any days that might have some sort of religious connotation to them.

Bob Stewart: They all have religious connotations.

Q375 **Ian Paisley:** Are you thinking of Remembrance weekend?



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Chris Heaton-Harris: If we get to the 28th and I have called the election, I will be naming the date very quickly afterwards.

Q376 **Ian Paisley:** Will it be the 8th or the 15th?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am not going to say yet, Ian, but you are in the right zone.

Q377 **Chair:** You can confirm it would be before Christmas.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Chair: What could be nicer than campaigning in Belfast—

Ian Paisley: We had a 12 December election.

Chair: Yes, indeed, and the general learning from that was that we would never have a general election in December again, but there we go.

Q378 **Ian Paisley:** Some 68% of households in Northern Ireland use heating oil, compared to about 3.2% of houses here in the UK mainland. The Northern Ireland Oil Federation and the Consumer Council have both said that, even with the comparator the Government are doing, households would still be somewhere between £500 and £900 worse off if the Government use their current calculations in terms of the energy price cap. What are you going to be able to do for those households burning central heating oil? What will support look like and when will it kick in? The Prime Minister did make a comment that it would start before the end of October. Do you have any update on that?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Let us start at the very beginning of this. We would be able to get that money to households much more quickly if there was a functioning Executive, because there are the processes there and the context there. I will not labour that point.

Q379 **Ian Paisley:** It is not accurate, is it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is.

Q380 **Ian Paisley:** You push a button; it happens.

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is the problem: for heating oil, you do not push a button. You will know the market better than I do in Northern Ireland. My constituency has quite a reliance on heating oil itself. There are a myriad of suppliers of heating oil in Northern Ireland. Lots of them are just family, one or two-tanker companies. In terms of how they do their business, trying to marshal all of that from a central Government point of view, when you have never done that before, will take more time. Money will be backdated, so we will make sure people get the right money. When it comes to the heating oil market, as I have found, it is much more complicated.

You cited a couple of figures that my BEIS colleagues would dispute. They have been looking at the price of heating oil and how much it has gone up. Heating oil has actually been going up, because it is in that



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unregulated space, as it were, when it comes to price caps or Government intervention; let us call it that. It has basically been going up for the last year or so, certainly since the onset of the issues in Ukraine. The market has risen, but not to such an extent that the intervention required to equalise with what we are doing for gas and electric would be what you say.

I mentioned non-domestic heating oil. Earlier we were trying to find a solution. I wrote to your Minister for the economy asking for a bit of help in trying to find the right route through, through his good offices. I am awaiting a reply on that. It is a suboptimal way of doing things. It would be much better if we could do it through the Executive

Q381 **Ian Paisley:** I understand why you have to say that but, thinking of the elderly person in County Antrim tonight, shivering because it is three degrees there, not 14 degrees like it is in London, what can be done to get my constituents and the constituents of my colleagues here resource, and what will that resource look like?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The resource will be the amount that has been outlined. When will it come? I honestly cannot give the answer to that because we are looking to find the delivery mechanism. It will come, so people can rely on that.

Q382 **Ian Paisley:** The Prime Minister said it would happen.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think it was by the end of November.

Q383 **Ian Paisley:** That is not slipping.

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. That is not slipping. As you quite rightly outlined, there are people today worried about the cold. I understand that, and I know that some people are choosing to fill their tanks by going to different places and getting small quantities of heating oil for quite high prices, way above the market.

We want to get the money out as quickly as we can. We would love to do it with the Executive because we think that would be the quickest way of doing it. We are looking at every option we have available to us and are talking to everybody who can help us.

Q384 **Ian Paisley:** The Republic of Ireland has an oil reserve scheme in place, so it must have so many days of reserve oil. Believe it or not, a significant portion of that oil reserve is in Northern Ireland. We have zero oil reserves in Northern Ireland, certainly nothing held by the national Government. Is there a plan to change that? Is that a national strategic issue that needs to be changed by His Majesty's Government.

Chris Heaton-Harris: His Majesty's Government are certainly looking at how we can become self-sufficient in our energy supply. Ideally, we are looking at something like 2040 or 2045, but that does not help with this particular issue today.



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Q385 **Ian Paisley:** No. Jacob Rees-Mogg stated in the House that for businesses there would be legislation that would be brought back to start on 1 October.

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is correct.

Q386 **Ian Paisley:** Does that still apply? Is that part of last night's package, or is there more to come?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is still happening, but it includes that non-domestic piece that I just talked about. That will not be immediate but payments are notionally calculated from 1 October.

Q387 **Ian Paisley:** There are two weeks left of this month to put that legislation through.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Q388 **Ian Paisley:** You are going to be busy, Secretary of State.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes. That is why there are no gaps for many other things.

Q389 **Fay Jones:** This is an issue that affects my constituency quite heavily as well. Two thirds of my constituency is off the gas grid, so we have an awful lot in common on this issue. I am very concerned that the package of measures, as it stands, is going to risk putting people into even more fuel poverty, just at the point when the new Chancellor has said he is going to withdraw the scheme in its entirety and look at it on a targeted basis. He mentioned yesterday that, rather than the scheme running for two years, it is going to be targeted from April next year.

If we only provide people in Northern Ireland who live off the gas grid with £100 now, we are going to make it more expensive in the long run, because we are going to push people into more fuel poverty in April next year. Do you not share that concern that, because we are not doing very much now, we are going to give ourselves more to do later on?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I understand the point. Do I think more people will be in fuel poverty at that time? I very much hope not. It rather depends on what the market price looks like and whether the market settles. No one can actually tell you how things are going to look in April next year, which is why I was not as surprised as everybody else when the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the scheme for domestic use will be looked at at that point in time. If you went back a year from April this year, you would be in a completely different marketplace.

I have been overt and very forward leaning on making the point that people who are using heating oil—forgive me; I do not know your constituency well so I will just talk about in Northern Ireland—are taking decisions now as to how they get their supply. As I mentioned to Mr Paisley, some people are choosing to go and get 20 or 30 litres at £1.60 instead of getting 500 litres at £1.10 or whatever. Therein lies a problem, and that is based on cashflow. I am really keen to find a solution and get



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the money to people so that they can make proper decisions on how they fill their tanks.

Q390 **Fay Jones:** On that basis, do you think £100 is sufficient?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is the calculation that BEIS has made based on the rise in prices of heating oil over the last period compared with the rise in prices of gas. I am going to get it wrong. Ian, you were on the call; was it 7% that Jacob Rees-Mogg said?

Q391 **Ian Paisley:** Yes. I think the point also is that only the Government hold to that figure. The Consumer Council and everyone else say it is multiples more.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Forgive me; I am not a BEIS Minister. I was on that call in support of both parties, as it were. That is where that calculation is from. BEIS has gone out to market to try to get the data that supports that figure.

Fay Jones: I have a Westminster Hall debate on this tomorrow. I am sure you are busy.

Q392 **Chair:** Secretary of State, I cannot think of many people who will wander down to a domestic fuel provider and say, "Could you please give me 11 litres of heating fuel to take back?" It is a minimum of 500. They are buying an expensive commodity. Gas and electricity providers have an obligation—as I understand it, though it is not my area of expertise, so somebody correct me if I am getting any of this wrong—if somebody is having difficulty in paying, to stagger bills, or to do part payments, monthly instalments and so forth. There are key meters and the like. If you have an oil tanker turning up at your property, chucking in 250 or 500 litres of fuel or whatever, they expect either pre-payment or payment on the day; otherwise, they will come and suck it all out of your tank and go and sell it to somebody who can pay.

There are two sides to this coin. There is first the point that Mr Paisley and Ms Jones have been talking about, which is the robustness and adequacy of the £100, but there is also the differential, and it seems to me unfair that somebody who is reliant upon domestic heating oil, because they cannot access anything else, does not have the flexibility of repayment over a staged period of time with their domestic fuel provider, as somebody would if they were a client of OVO, SSE, British Gas, Centrica or whoever.

Could you and BEIS colleagues look at that quite urgently, because Ms Jones is on to something here? We are going to find people in fuel poverty and, by the time the Chancellor comes to look at it again in April, the quantum of people who qualify under that definition will have risen disproportionately if you are off grid, making it more expensive for the Treasury, because it will have a greater black hole to fill.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I would be delighted to take that away. Just so you know, the examples I was giving were given to me by—I hope I get



the organisation right—the Northern Ireland Consumer Council. They came to see me three weeks ago and were giving me examples as to what behaviours were now happening because of the concerns over heating oil and people’s liquid assets.

Ian Paisley: The Northern Ireland Oil Federation and the Consumer Council are the main spokesbodies on this.

Chair: I cannot see anybody getting 11 litres only of heating fuel.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Forgive me for citing examples from experts. I know experts are out of fashion.

Q393 **Ian Paisley:** It is an issue. Companies will deliver this. It is practice, and unfortunately the costs are horrendous, but people do it because it is all they can buy at that moment.

Chair: Sorry—I am turning Mr Paisley into a witness. Is the unit cost greater? If you are travelling around sparsely populated rural areas dropping off 11 litres here and 11 litres there, trying to generate a profit on that is actually damned difficult given the cost of your own transport fuel.

Ian Paisley: It is, but, if that is all you can afford, that is what they will sell you.

Chair: We do not want to see a circumstance, do we, where people are turning up with jerrycans and travelling all over the place?

Ian Paisley: It is offered. It is a service that is offered.

Q394 **Stephen Farry:** To add to the previous conversation, one of the side effects to this may be that people switch more to electric heaters, rather than using oil. That is more inefficient but slightly more dangerous as well, in some respects. It will also put more pressure on the grid. I know the Government are trying to manage the risk of blackouts, etc., so I am just putting that into the mix too.

On a different matter around funding, can I raise the issue of the shared prosperity fund? I want to ask two questions in relation to that. The first one is about the long-running frustration about the scope and level of interaction between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Ministers in relation to planning in that respect. I will give you an example. European funds traditionally support a lot of the work of Invest Northern Ireland and a lot of the work around apprenticeships in terms of Government support. There is a danger that the Executive cannot plan ahead as to whether they need to backfill that, or whether that will be done through shared prosperity. It is unclear at this stage.

The second issue is a more immediate cliff edge. There are a lot of community voluntary groups that traditionally access the European social fund, which is coming to an end. There is no clarity at this stage about what is going to be happening in that respect. Those groups are very close to putting their staff on protective notice. There are potentially



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1,700 jobs at risk, and there are about 17,000 users of those schemes. I appreciate it is for DLUHC, but to what extent is the Northern Ireland Office involved in those discussions? Is there any prospect of some degree of resolution in the near future?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I might have to turn to my officials for a bit of help on this particular one. I can definitely confirm that, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, NDNA funding continues to be delivered by the UK Government.

Stephen Farry: It is the shared prosperity fund.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Madeleine Alessandri: The NIO is in support of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on this, but it has the lead and has been engaging, as you will be aware, across Departments in Northern Ireland but also with community groups. The concern that you have expressed is one that we hear as well very often. People are concerned about the cliff edge when the SPF funding ends and what will then come in its way.

I know my colleagues in DLUHC are working very hard on this to make sure that everybody is consulted and that we can get forward and get things moving as quickly as possible.

Q395 **Mr Campbell:** Secretary of State, on levelling up, the criteria were released in terms of what each of the different regions and nations of the UK might expect to receive, and then we were able to see the figures that they received in the first round. Northern Ireland was the worst in terms of that differential. What we were expecting to receive was more than what we actually received. Are steps being taken to make sure that is redressed next time around?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I believe so, but again I shall turn to one of my colleagues.

Madeleine Alessandri: Yes. The second round is going through at the moment. Again, DLUHC is leading and doing an extensive engagement across the piece. In terms of levelling up, we will see how the next round of allocation, the second round, which will come out shortly, will go.

Q396 **Mr Campbell:** Many people will be looking to see that there will be redress and that it will not be a case of us being levelled up to what we would expect to get but, when you look at both rounds, we are still less than what we were expected to get if you put the two rounds together. I presume addressing the shortfall will mean an over-allocation this time, so that the two combined will be roughly where we were expected to be.

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are not in charge of that level of detail in making those choices.



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Madeleine Alessandri: No. We can ask our colleagues in DLUHC to write to the Committee, if that would be helpful, to set out the position.

Q397 **Ian Paisley:** Could you clarify and ask if there will be a third round for Northern Ireland?

Madeleine Alessandri: I cannot comment on that. I am not aware.

Q398 **Ian Paisley:** I know you cannot, but can you ask them?

Madeleine Alessandri: Yes. We will ask them to clarify that as well. We can do that.

Q399 **Claire Hanna:** Going back to “New Decade, New Approach”, there are a lot of specific commitments that have not been progressed. While some of that is down to Covid and the drag that created, a lot is down to political disfunction. The deal states that all funding provided in the financial package accompanying the deal will be withdrawn if the institutions collapse. Does that statement hold in the current circumstances?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are still funding NDNA.

Q400 **Claire Hanna:** Even if it collapses.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think so, yes.

Q401 **Claire Hanna:** The point is that it is yet another case where people have been let down before and have had these pledges and commitments made to them. Many of them relate to real, everyday quality of life issues, particularly in health. There is one in particular that I know my colleague has corresponded with you on, which is dealing with addiction and a specific commitment to the Northlands addiction treatment centre. My colleague, the MP for Foyle, has been advocating for that. Can you confirm that commitments like that one, specifically in “New Decade, New Approach”, will be held to?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have a list of some of the big figures but I do not have the breakdown of what has been funded.

Madeleine Alessandri: In terms of the big elements and the things that are already agreed, where the money is committed, we are already up to expecting, by the end of this year, £769 million of the £2 billion.

In respect of the issue you raise around the rehabilitation centre elements, I need to check back on this and come back to you. Can I come back to you? There is a Department of Health responsibility in that.

Chris Flatt: We are in touch with the Department of Health and we are expecting a business case in relation to that. We are in discussion with them about it and waiting for a business case to ensure the funding—

Chair: Maybe we can have a composite note.

Q402 **Claire Hanna:** I was keen to get that. That is one of the specific



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commitments. As you will know, people will have eagerly followed those developments and will be keen to see the outcomes. Could you give us a general update on what measures from “New Decade, New Approach” have been implemented since the last update in March, and outline how governance is being reviewed and supported on those commitments in the absence of an Executive?

Madeleine Alessandri: There is a plan for a written ministerial statement, which is due to be tabled very imminently.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is imminent.

Madeleine Alessandri: That will set out all of that—our six-monthly report.

Q403 **Chair:** Can we turn now to legacy? As a starting point, your predecessor was always at great pains to say that the framework of the Bill, capable of amendment, etc., was like the last chance saloon. This was the legislative opportunity to seek to resolve these outstanding issues. If that came to nought, no Secretary of State would ever revisit it. The potato would just be too hot and the existing imperfect system would just continue by default. As a starter, is that your position?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I tend to think that is true, yes. I tend to think this is the last legislative vehicle that will go down this road.

Q404 **Chair:** This is an easy one to ask and a difficult one to answer, I am sure, but is there anything that, since you have become Secretary of State, you have looked at in the legacy Bill and thought to yourself that, if you had been drafting it, you might have done this or that bit differently or had a different approach, or, in broad terms, on the underpinning principles of the Bill, are you content with it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Chris Flatt is my resident expert on this and has been working on legacy issues for many years. Is it two decades? Is it that long? He is my corporate historic memory on this. I tend to think that any Bill can be improved, so I am taking the opportunity, being a new Secretary of State. The Bill is going to get its Second Reading in the Lords next week or the week after. I am trying to do some engagement on this so that I can talk to different people. I have all sorts of people to talk to for the rest of this week and next week, for example. We will then sit down, and I am sure there will be a host of Government amendments.

I listened very closely to the debate that was had in the House of Commons. I have listened very closely and read quite widely about what people’s views are. I would like to use this opportunity to improve the Bill as best I can as it goes through its process. I will be looking for those improvements to come, hopefully, in the Lords. That is where I broadly am.

Q405 **Chair:** Is there an area in the Bill where you are particularly envisaging Government amendments and finessing of the approach?



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Chris Heaton-Harris: There are a host of areas in the Bill where I think there could be improvements. I understand how we have got to where we have got to. Information gathering and retrieval is unbelievably important. We were talking earlier today about inquests and what they have brought in the past. Sometimes in the past they have taken too long but currently they are a bit quicker, and sometimes that has been a route. I am trying to build up a complete picture of how we have got to where we have got to.

It is such a complicated area, and I know there are many pitfalls in it that other people have already fallen down so I do not need to. I am relying on good advice to make sure that, when we get to that point, these are valid improvements.

Q406 **Chair:** Would you see it in the category of improvement or change to rethink the arbitrary cut-off point with regards to access to justice?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We have been talking about this within the Department. I am still taking views on that.

Chair: It is an interesting topic.

Q407 **Stephen Farry:** This is a very sensitive issue, Secretary of State, but there was a situation in relation to the Dennis Hutchings memorial in Palace Barracks, in my constituency, and the Cunningham family and the death of their son. There are sensitivities with the family. They have been in touch, seeking a meeting, to just to talk it through with you. Could you take that forward and consider it? It is an MoD matter, but it cuts across with legacy as well.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am trying to talk to as broad a group of people as I can in the next few weeks. I cannot promise that I will, but I will ask my officials to see if that is at all possible.

Q408 **Chair:** I have a final question on the legacy Bill. Your predecessor had responded reasonably positively to the idea of not fishing in a restricted Northern Ireland pool for commissioners. Is that still your view? This is for the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I received advice and I said I would like to keep it within the UK. Again, we have been talking about what that actually looks like and whether that is a good or bad idea.

Q409 **Chair:** Do you want to say a word or two about the cultural Bill introduced last week?

Chris Heaton-Harris: What would you like me to say about it? It is a promise we are keeping. I would much rather it be done by the Executive, which might be a bit of a repetition of things I have said. I understand that, again, people would like to improve it in certain ways. I am looking forward to the Committee stage.



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Q410 **Ian Paisley:** Are you actively considering any amendments?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am not, at this stage, but I am not at the point where I would be.

Q411 **Ian Paisley:** Will it be a Committee of the whole House?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It will be a Committee of the whole House.

Q412 **Chair:** We do not have a Committee date for that yet.

Chris Heaton-Harris: No, we do not yet.

Q413 **Mr Campbell:** Just on that, Secretary of State, there has been some concern expressed in the last few months on the issue of the commissioners, one for the Irish language and one for the Ulster-British tradition. The concern was that, while some of the powers of the Irish language commissioner would include that he or she would have to have due regard to certain issues, the commissioner for the Ulster-British tradition did not have to have due regard to those same issues as it affected people who would come under his or her remit. Is that being looked at in terms of potential amendments?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It was certainly well debated in the House last week. I do not want to reopen the debate that we had. In terms of "New Decade, New Approach" and how this is being dealt with, we are trying to keep as faithfully to that as possible.

I know things have moved on, and, as I say, everything can be improved but the role as envisaged of the Ulster-Scots or Ulster-British commissioner will be slightly different to the Irish language commissioner, in that it will enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with Ulster-Scots and Ulster-British tradition in Northern Ireland. As part of that, the commissioner will provide advice and guidance to public authorities, distribute publicity material and receive complaints. That was essentially lifted from the original document that was agreed by all parties. I am particularly wary, as Secretary of State, of unpicking things that have been agreed beforehand.

Q414 **Stephen Farry:** One of the other areas of unfinished business is around the final commissioning of abortion services in Northern Ireland. I appreciate that your predecessor, Brandon Lewis, did a lot of work in this area and put in place a unit of health advisers inside the Department to advise in that regard. I was hopeful that there would be a final decision taken on this sometime in the summer. I am conscious that we are now into the middle of the autumn. Do you have any update in terms of likely timescales for the final direction in that regard, given that we have seen no progress in the local Department?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I intend to take the final decision on this, in my role anyway, within the next couple of weeks.

Q415 **Chair:** Secretary of State, was there anything else that you were hoping



that we might ask you that we have not? Is there anything that you are relieved that we did not?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have a long list of things I am relieved you have not asked. That is fantastic.

Chair: Would you like to go through that list?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Maybe next time.

Q416 **Chair:** Just before you go, you talked about that communications campaign within England, Scotland and Wales about the importance of the Good Friday agreement. Nobody would quibble with you on that. Speaking to Sir Robert's point about the generational shift, for the peace generation a lot of this stuff is taught as history or something that is read in books, in terms of the horror that most or many of us around the table will remember, either directly or watching from the mainland. Is that not something that needs to also be done within Northern Ireland, just to say, "Do not take this for granted. It was bloody awful before. It could be bloody awful again. The Good Friday agreement and the processes etc. that flow from it need to be nurtured and tended"?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am sure there is something to that. I am going to Queen's University in the not-too-distant future to talk at the students' union.

Q417 **Chair:** I am talking about schoolkids. If you look at those scenes, when there are conflagrations, it is 12, 13, 14 or 15-year-olds out throwing the odd brick or petrol bomb. Secondary school kids are the ones who are often most easily recruited by the godfathers to do the messy work on the streets. They are the ones who need to be reminded.

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is a huge amount of work that goes on within schools, with after-school activities, clubs and whatever, in Northern Ireland to try to ensure that people do not travel down the path you have just described. I have to say that the young people I have come across in Northern Ireland are probably some of the more politically aware people I have ever come across. I might have just been talking to the wrong group of people because I am the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. If you rock up to a meeting with me, first, you need to get a life, especially if you are a teenager, and, secondly, you have come with a purpose. I might have a self-selecting audience of people who talk about it.

I am very aware of and look at the stats about young people who leave Northern Ireland to go to university elsewhere and then do not return, because of concerns of what the future might look like, or preconceived ideas, which are not true, of what the past was and what might happen in the future; I see Northern Ireland as being an unbelievably prosperous and wonderful place for people to live as we move forward. This is where there needs to be an element of celebration of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and what it has done for the last 25 years. There are many



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plans afoot as to how we can talk about it and do that across communities in Northern Ireland.

Q418 **Chair:** Your Department had a budget stream and a programme, if you remember, to commemorate, celebrate and mark the centenary of Northern Ireland as an entity. Is there a plan to do the same?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is definitely a plan, and bless the lovely officials—I have met them a couple of times now—who are busily working away on it. Yes, there is a well-established plan.

Madeleine Alessandri: It is a well-established plan.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid it involves the odd speech from me.

Chair: There will be many people who will be putting in their devices how many sleeps until a speech by the Secretary of State.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Until they get the one big sleep.

Chair: Secretary of State, thank you for your time. Thank you also to your officials. As always, it is a great pleasure to see you all. Thank you for taking our questions and for the manner with which you have answered. We look forward, Ms Alessandri, to receiving your note on that funding issue. I wonder, colleagues, if we are in agreement about whether we should write to the Secretary of State at BEIS on the heating oil issue. We will copy in the Secretary of State to that. Thank you very much indeed for your attendance.